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ABSTRACT

Since there is a lack of studies that reveal school age children's oral competence in story production, a five-year longitudinal descriptive study was undertaken to determine a child's sense of story as revealed by children's oral generation of stories. The specific story elements analyzed were sources of their stories, narrative form, formal elements, number and kinds of characters, connectors between clauses, and minimal terminable units (T-units). Data were collected from five students at the beginning of first grade, at the end of first grade, at the end of second grade, and at the end of fifth grade. For each collection of data, each participant was asked to tell two stories, which were audio recorded. Fluctuations in source of story, narrative form, and formal elements suggested that the development of story concept is not a closer and closer approximation of an adult's concept of narrative. Rather, students appeared to be reformulating a story concept as they moved from folk/fairy tale conventions to a sense of genre or a lack of sense of genre for stories. Moreover, the children did not advance at the same pace in story concept formation. Only the linguistic elements, T-units and connectors between clauses, showed a consistent and forward development to more complex structures and items by all the students. (HOD)

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STORY CONCEPT: STORY PROCESS

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STORY CONCEPT: STORY PROCESS

Narratives are found in all cultures and have a history of themselves. Traditionally, the study of stories has been an ongoing concern expecially of anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists. Ong (1982) noted that narratives are more functional in primarily oral cultures. Yet storytelling has been documented by Weir (1960) and Halliday (1975) as one of the first uses of language. Currently the use of narratives for reading and reading instruction has been commonly accepted by the educational community. Some researchers (Applebee, 1977; Green and Laff, 1980; Smith, 1982) believe that children's sense of narrative structure is more highly developed than expository structure. However, Wade (1983) suggested that very young children have a much wider concept of story than adults and even five-year-olds. More recently researchers (Stenning and Michell, 1985) analyzed children's stories to determine if a child's thinking affected the telling of a story. Disagreement exists between researchers and disciplines as to what constitutes a child's narrative competence.

Generally researchers have focused on two approaches for analysis--content or structure. Story content has centered primarily on motivational psychodynamic aspects of the story characters (Erickson, 1963; Pitcher and Prelinger, 1963; Ames, 1966; Gould, 1972; Scheffler, 1975; Kemper, 1984). These studies have noted that children's themes gradually change with age. Kemper (1984) concluded that the development of story content seems highly dependent on available models.

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Story structure has been the most researched aspect of children's stories (Rumelhart, 1975; Thorndyke, 1975; Shank, 1975; Minsky, 1975; Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Stein and Glenn, 1977; Stein, 1978; Applebee, 1978; Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1980; Sutton-Smith, 1981; Peterson and McCabe, 1983; Kemper, 1984). From these studies, two types of story structure have emerged--story grammar and story schema. Mandler (1984) felt that it is important to distinguish between story grammar and story schema. In her view grammar is a rule system devised for the purpose of describing the regularities found in one kind of text, whereas story schema is a mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the way in which stories proceed.

Regardless of the research approach, important aspects of story structure have been revealed by these studies. For example, Bower (1976) and Thorndyke (1975) concluded that a coherent story is remembered better than narration of a series of unrelated events. Stein and Glenn's (1978) study found that younger children could not remember deviations from the expected sequences as well as older children. Stein (1978) concluded that story grammars as they are now formulated cannot account for all of the variation in structures spontaneously generated by children. Moreover, story grammars fail to include the types of changes which occur in story schemeta as a function of age. Stein proposed that studies which describe the process of change must be initiated. Kemper (1984) stated the processes of diffferentiating plot structures and substituting other causes of enablement links seem independent of the types of stories children experience.

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Attempts to integrate and assimilate the results of these studies have proven difficult for four reasons: (1) Diverse elicitation procedures were used to obtain the stories; (2) Different relationships were established between the researchers and participants; (3) Inconsistent prompts and/or probes were used or not used at various times during the procedures; (4) The participants' ability range varied greatly in the studies as well as the available story corpea did not reflect our contemporary society.

Method and Procedures

Based on these observations along with the observation that there is a lack of studies which reveal school age children's oral competence in story production, a five year longitudinal descriptive study was undertaken to determine a child's sense of story as revealed by children's oral generation of stories. An additional component of the study was to investigate the relationship of elicitation procedures on story elements. The final aspect of the study was to identify possible developmental trends or patterns in the story elements.

The specific story elements analyzed in the children's stories were (1) sources of their stories, (2) narrative form (Applebee, 1978), (3) formal elements (Applebee, 1978), (4) number and kinds of characters, (5) connectors between clauses, and (6) minimal terminal units (Hunt, 1965). Of these elements items one, two, and four were used to ascertain the macrostructure of the narrative and the sense of story in the texts. Items three, five, and six were used to ascertain the microstructure of connectors and sentences or the written and oral

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language devices in the texts. For the purpose of the study the following terms were delineated:

T-unit. According to Hunt (1965), a T-unit is a minimal terminable unit whose total length contains one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it.

Stage of narrative form. As interpreted by Applebee, (1978), the stages are indicated by these terms.

1. Heaps. The use of diffuse, undirected extension of the meaning of the sign to inherently unrelated objects linked by chance in the child's perception. Organization is syncretistic, rooted in the child's perception, and is essentially related to the characteristics of the material to be organized.

2. Sequences. The use of events that have a superficial arbitrary sequence in time. Events are linked together on the basis of an attribute shared with a common center or core of a story. Associations between the incidents and their center are limited to bonds of similarity rather than causality or complementarity.

3. Primitive narrative. The use of an object or event that has temporarily assumed some importance to the child, which is then developed by collecting around it a set of complementary attributes. A concrete core or center serves to give a point or focus which the collection around it amplifies or clarifies.

4. Unfocused chains. The use of incidents which lead directly from one to another, but the attributes which link them continue to shift. The result is a story which has much of the structure of a narrative but as a whole loses its point and direction.

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5. Focused chains. The use of a center which has a main character rooted in the concrete who goes through a series of events linked one to another. A continuing adventure type of story results from the production.

6. Narratives. The expanded use of centering of the focused chains to include links based on complementary attributes. Such stories have a consistent forward movement and often but not necessarily a climax at the end. The core holds everything together either on concrete, perceptual bonds or on abstract, conceptual ones. Stories at this stage have begun to have a theme or moral.

Formal elements. According to Applebee (1978), the elements are indicated by these terms.

1. Formal begining. The use of openings in narratives such as "once upon a time."

2. Formal ending. The use of formalistic or ritualistic endings to narratives that range from "the end" to "happily ever after" to "coming home to dinner and bed."

3. Past tense. The consistent use of past tense in the narrative.

In order to have some assurance of obtaining a cross-section of reading abilities and linguistic maturity, the classroom teacher identified the participants according to their reading ability. That is, the teacher selected two students with high reading ability, two with average reading ability, and two with low reading ability, which were confirmed by their reading achievement scores on the Iowa Basic Skills Test (Grade level 2.6, 2.6, 2.0, 1.3 and K.7). One low

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ability student was lost from the study by virtue of moving to another school district.

Data were collected from the students at the beginning of first grade, at the end of first grade, at the end of second grade, and at the end of fifth grade. For each collection of data, each participant was asked to tell two stories which were audio recorded. For the first story, the student was directed to "Tell me a story." After the completion of this story, six finger animal puppets were placed in front of the child. The student was instructed to "Choose one of these puppets, two of these puppets, three or more of these puppets, or all of these puppets, and tell me a story."

The analyses of the elements consisted of examining the number and kinds of each of the story elements in order to determine exactly what changes occurred, if any, and how great the noted changes were. Descriptive statistics were used to arrange, describe, summarize, and compare the observations. To arrange and describe the information, frequency counts were prepared for each story element. These frequency counts were then grouped into frequency distributions for summarization. Finally, the arithmetic mean was employed to compare the quantitative changes in the elements as reflected in the percentage of gain or loss in the arithmetic mean for each year of education. Similarities and differences in the observations of the six story elements were anlayzed across and within the two hypotheses. Although ten students were studied longitudinally from two separate school districts, only five of the students at one school district will be presented as one aspect of a larger statistical study. The results for each of the six elements are provided and briefly

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discussed. For this report, frequency counts are presented in parenthesis after a statement to document an observation.

Story Examples

(1) The monkey and the alliga'or was friends all year but when the alligator went in the wate- the monkey was all alone That's all

(2) Once there was thi', alligator and he wanted to swim in the pond but he had to clean the pond out first but he didn't do as his mom said so he went on and got bit by a little electric eel and he had to go to the doctor to see what the electric eel did to him and it made him electric and it made him act like an electric eel That's all

(3) One day there was this alligator this alligator he was swimming in the water and this ostrich came out and bit the alligator's tail and the alligator chased the ostrich right through the water all the way to the army base where a mean mean turtle lived and then when the alligator chased the ostrich right at the door of the mean mean sergeant came right out the door and said what did you just do and he goes I just ate somebody. . .

(4) Once there lived a little monkey in a jungle it was a bad old jungle well he was jumping around from tree to tree and he seen something really small and green walking down the path and he went what's that and he swung down and he landed right in front of it he goes what are you he goes a turtle what are you he goes a monkey . . .

Each of these stories is from the same student when the elicitation procedure was the finger puppets and the student was told to select one or more of the puppets and tell a story. Stories one and two are complete stories which were told at the beginning of first grade and at the end of first grade respectively. Stories three and

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four are incomplete stories which were told at the end of second grade and fifth grade respectively. These stories are not printed in their entirety because of the length of the stories. Other than increasing the length of their stories what were the changes that occurred in their stories? How elicitation procedures affect the story elements as well as documentating what changes occurred in the story elements as students mature was the focus of the longitudinal aspect of the study.

Results

Sources of Stories

Sources of the children's stories were analyzed to determine from where came the content of their stories. This study indicated three sources for their stories--actual experiences, versions of a known story, or created untrue imaginative stories.

As illustrated by the observations for the sources for their stories, the children's content for stories changed. That is, at the beginning of first grade most of their stories were based upon actual experiences that had occurred in their lives or created untrue imaginative narratives (4 actual experiences, 1 version of a story, and 5 created stories). By the end of fifth grade their stories were primarily created untrue imaginative narratives or perhaps a version of a story or an occasional actual experience (7 created stories, 2 versions of stories, and 1 actual experience).

Ultimately for all students the choice of whether to generate a story that was a version of an existing story or to generate a created story appeared to depend upon the elicitation procedure. If the direction was "Tell me a story," their productions could be a version

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of a story, a created story, or an actual experience (1 actual experience, 2 versions of stories, and 2 created stories). However, when the six animal puppets were provided, certain restrictions were placed upon story content and/or characters so that the students had to work with or around the constraints they themselves had placed on the content of the story. Since there were no existing stories that used these characters, the children were forced to create a story (0 actual experiences, 0 versions of stories, and 5 created stories).

Narrative Form

The children's concept of story plot as indicated by the observations fluctuated for each student. This fluctuation suggested that there was no fixed order of development of plot--the children were primarily focusing on events which could be sequences, focused or unfocused chains (3 sequences, 1 primitive narrative, 2 unfocused chains, 2 focused chains, 2 narratives). By the end of fifth grade some students were unable to approximate a narrative except when they told a version of a story (2 primitive narratives, 1 unfocused chain, 2 focused chains, and 5 narratives). Yet embeddings were emerging in several students' stories so that there was a consistent forward movement as the events developed and elaborated the situation.

Formal Elements

Throughout the study, the children's use of formal elements as defined by Applebee (1978) fluctuated. Although the students indicated an understanding that stories occurred in the past at the beginning of first grade, they had difficulty managing the concept of time as their stories became longer and more complex (past tense 7, 4, 8, and 3). The students' use of past tense revealed a switching back

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and forth of past and present tense within the narrative but not within sentences. For example,

> I live on a farm and we have a lot of goats and some chickens and some ducks and just last year my daddy built a second story on our house it was a basement. . .

That is, for an episode the students might conistently use past tense; for the next episode or perhaps several episodes later they used present tense. These episodes of tenses seemed to indicate that they were organizing their stories around a series of events based upon a time perspective.

The openings of their stories were changing from an emphasis on openings associated with folk/fairy tales such as "Once upon a time. . ." to openings that indicated immediate action such as "One day monkey . . .," "the frog . . .," or "I. . . " (formal openings 5, 6, 10 to 4). It appeared that these students had mastered the conventions associated with folk/fairy tales and were moving toward other openings.

Endings such as "That's it" or "The end" were eventually uttered by all of the students. However, these endings usually were uttered after a long pause and appeared to be artificial endings. Endings were signaled with intonation; it hardly mattered what the final words were. The final formal ending utterance seemed to be the children's verbal manner of telling the researcher "I am finished" since they had previously terminated the story orally (formal endings 10, 10, 10 to 8).

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At the end of fifth grade the students' stories which were elicited by the puppets contained the fewest number of formal elements (1 beginning, 5 endings, 1 past tense). These observations seemed to suggest that the students were reformulating their story concept. Two students appeared to be using devices more characteristic of plays in that these stories used openings which described the setting and used sustained dialogue rather than single sentence insertion dialogue. That is, statements such as "he said" did not precede or follow the dialogue.

> now they're in the water sergeant guess what what I found a prisoner. . .

Number and Kinds of Characters

The observations of the data for the number and kinds of characters indicated the the number of characters in the stories increased steadily (36, 38, 44 to 53) and the the kinds of characters became predominately animals (13 people, 40 animals). Rather than developing the characters , the students simply included more characters in their stories.

Throughout the study if the elicitation procedure was "Choose one or more of these puppets and tell a story," the characters were almost exclusively the animal puppets so that by the end of fifth grade the students were using almost entirely the six animal puppets (12, 13, 19, to 22). Again, it appeared that the students were unable to work around the restraints the puppets placed on their stories for characters and content.

Connectors between Clauses (Prosodic and Lexical Items)

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In this study the students relied primarily on stylistic devices more characteristic of informal speech with prosodic items such as and as a filler, and then, and so, and with intonation and pauses. However, the inclusion of lexical items was emerging in their stories. The number of lexical items had more than doubled and some even quadrupled by two students so that clausal and conditional relations were being expressed in addition to temporal sequence (subordinating conjunctions 13, 21, 25, 56).

The students used three types of pauses in their oral generation of stories throughout the entire study. The first pause which was a long pause occurred after the students were instructed to tell a story. This pause appeared to reflect their concern for thematic content. That is, they were deciding on an idea for a story and were forming the direction of the story.

The second pause occurred during the generation of the story, and the number of these pauses tended to decrease each time the students told a story. In this kind of pause the students appeared to construct meaning at a specific or focal level. That is, they uttered word, phrase, or clause units as their ideas were being shaped such as

once upon a time (pause) there was a little girl (pause)
and she (pause) liked red (pause) red was her
favorite color (pause) one time her mother
asked her (pause) if she would like a blue belt (pause)
she said no mom . . .
one day in a dark (pause) foggy swamp (pause) a (pause)
frog was swimming (pause) when he saw a turtle (pause)
the turtle said hi (pause) to the frog (pause) . . .

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By the end of fifth grade several of the students used almost exclusively clause units wherein they were able to utter several clauses before pausing. This observation suggested that children generate oral language in larger units after they know more about language processing. This change would seem to indicate that as students mature, they were more efficient in processing ideas at the focal level. For example,

> once there was a little bitty bird (pause) and he lived on this big nest with his mom and his father they went out and they were searching for food and they couldn't find no food so (pause) the little bird was kind of scared because there was a bunch of snakes up on that mountain . . .

The third pause occurred at the end of the story. As the sense of conclusion was conveyed with appropriate intonation, this pause appeared to be a search by the students to exit from a situation which previously had been terminated orally.

Intonation (the dropping of the voice at the end of a statement or wh question) remained constant in the children's stories. The relationship between pauses, intonation, and T-units assists in making inferences about the thought processes of children. That is, the structure of the processing units for thoughts (pauses), written composition (T-units), and expression (intonation) differed for the individuals as well as for the group throughout the study. Yet the number of T-units and intonations indicated a close approximation. The number of T-units and the number of intonations differed because students would place two or more clauses in a single intonation contour such as the following:

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. . . the army was a war/and he did not like it. . .

. . . and the truck hit the car/and the diesel ran over

the car/and the monkey went flying out of the window . . .

This observation suggested that intonation reflected their knowledge of what a spoken sentence is rather than their thought structure.

Although there was a gradual inclusion of lexical items such as but, so, who, that, because, since, where, until, if, when, and then, it was only at the end of fifth grade that the students used causal and conditional connectors which allowed them to produce more complex syntactic forms. Even with more complex syntactic forms, the students still had not moved from temporal and/or causual events to rhetorical states in their story productions.

T-Units

Observations for the minimal terminable units indicated almost exclusive use of simple declarative sentence structure in their stories at the beginning of first grade (159 of 198 units). The children's linguistic performance from their oral stories indicated that the main clause (simple sentence) was the first sentence structure to be mastered, to be learned, and to be used almost exclusively. After the simple sentence, the students used conjoined sentences. This sentence structure consisted to two main clauses joined by and. The third type of sentence structure to emerge and be used spordically was embedded sentences. The students' embedded sentences typically expanded the object by a relative clause which used that as a connector. The final type of embedded structure to emerge and be used infrequently was the compound complex sentence. This type of sentence structure consisted of at least two main clauses

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and at least one subordinate clause. The compound complex sentence was used by students who were using lexical items to indicate causal or conditional relationships.

Slight differences were noted between the elicitation procedures. That is, a greater percentage (43% as opposed to 20%) of sentence structures other than the simple sentence form were used by the students at the end of fifth grade when they were directed to "Tell me a story" than when they were asked to use the animal puppets.

Summary

Throughout the study elicitation procedures were reflected in the source of story and the number and kinds of characters. At the end of fifth grade these elements as well as formal elements and T-units seemed to reflect differences in elicitation procedures.

Developmental trends or patterns were evident in number and kinds of characters, connectors between clauses, and T-units. Fluctuations in source of story, narrative form, and formal elements suggested that the development of story concept is not a closer and closer approximation of an adult's concept of narrative. Rather, students appeared to be reformulating a story concept as they moved from folk/fairy tale conventions to a sense of genre or a lack of sense of genre for stories. Moreover, the children did not advance at the same pace in story concept formation. Several showed little growth in plot development and story conventions: two students consistently advanced in all the story elements, whereas one child advanced very rapidly from very few story elements to a consistent and complex use of story elements. Only the linguistic elements T-units and connectors between clauses showed a consistent and forward development to more complex

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structures and items by all the students. This observation would tend to suggest that the linguistic elements may be independent of the type of stories the children were experiencing.

Story Concept

The children in the longitudinal aspect of the study seemed to veiw stories as untrue or imaginative narration, except for one child who consistently included actual experiences as one source of story. Their stories consisted primarily of events with temporal sequence and some causal and/or conditional relations. These series of events centered primarily on a main character or several characters. The openings of a story could be "Once upon a time. . . " or immediate action. The stories occurred in both the past and present as episodes were being told within the story. The stories could have a closing, or they could merely stop even though an utterance similar to "The end" was stated.

The main character(s) went through a series of events with other characters who were simply included in the story. Longer stories included more characters and consequently more events. The characters remained primarily flat even through some character identity was provided by names and words that indicate feelings and personality characteristics. The stories generally relied on oral language devices to convey meaning, but with the inclusion of lexical items indicating causal and conditional events more complex sentence structures were used in addition to the simple declarative sentence.

Story Process

From this study it would seem obvious that educators need to facilitate a wide range of language and story knowledge and usage for

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all grade levels. Students would benefit from opportunities to tell stories so that they become proficient in generating stories. At the same time students need guidance from educators to become more knowledgeable about story and language conventions at the intermediate level between their vague global story notions and their words as they are being shaped at the sentence level. Such an awareness may assist students in capturing and organizing their ideas during story generation.

For example, students would appear to benefit from assistance which would move them beyond event knowledge of stories to rhetorical states. Awareness of different types of plots as well as different types of conflict may assist in this kind of growth. Students may also benefit from some assistance in handling time in their stories so that they are not switching back and forth in tense within the narrative. As the students were somewhat awkward in handling single sentence insertion dialogue, more awareness of how dialogue is presented in stories may prove insightful to them. Discussion and examples of openings and endings in stories may increase students' awareness of conventions and how conventions vary from genre to genre.

However, increasing the students' awareness of the story elements involves more than just story production. At the same time they need to be experiencing and reading stories that are models for specific elements. Mere immersion of students with books is not sufficient for the students to develop a story concept. Educators should be providing specific writing experiences, reading experiences, oral experiences, and literature experiences which would advance these students in their language and story knowledge and usage. An ongoing

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story process is needed to allow students to integrate and orchestrate the story and language components simultaneously. Such as process is essential if students are to develop a story concept that goes beyond the conventions of "Once upon a time . . . "

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